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In Keith Barney's Territory, It's What You CAN Do That Counts

By Mary Chachas

"This patio, this floor, this unit are my territory," said Keith Barney, M.S.W., as he maneuvered his wheelchair to the shade of a tree on the rehabilitation unit patio. Barney, 41, a social worker in University of Utah Hospital's Spinal Cord Injury Center, is referring to several months spent in the hospital and rehab unit when he was 14 after a hunting accident resulted in a spinal cord injury.

Actually, Barney will cover a lot more territory during the next several months, including trails and shooting ranges, as he trains for the 2002 Paralympic Winter Games. A dream was realized in August when he qualified for a place with the U.S. Disabled Ski Team in the 5K and biathlon events in the Nordic competition.

One of eight children, Barney remembers that he was very lonely and somewhat sad during his hospital stay. "Nobody sat me down and told me I was paralyzed," he recalled. "They were ambiguous with the information they gave me and sort of let me figure it out by myself. At 14, I wanted to believe one thing—that I would be all right—but I put the facts together, the little pieces, figuring out what my future would be."

Back home in Idaho Falls, Idaho, he graduated from high school and "amazed Dad," who worried that Barney wouldn't have the necessary attention span for classes. He gives his father credit for believing that education was the equalizer and encouraging him to continue school.

Barney's athletic life began while he was a student at Brigham Young University. There he met Curt Brinkman, who got him into wheelchair road racing, and Mike Johnson, who introduced him to wheelchair basketball, a sport he played for 20 years.

After receiving his master's degree in social work from Portland State University, Barney began working in rehabilitation and knew he had found his life's work.

Barney's early goal was to compete in Paralympic track and field, but completing his education and starting his family took priority over this effort. He later took up handcycling and, in 1988, pedaled across the United States. At the World Championships in Colorado Springs later that summer, he earned a Silver Medal in the road race and a Bronze Medal in the time trial. The next year, Barney was on the U.S. Disabled Cycling Team competing in Blois,

France, and he earned an individual Silver Medal in the time trial. His dream of riding his bike in the 2002 Sydney Games was shattered when handcycling was not added to those summer games.

With the loss of this opportunity, Barney decided to turn back to cross-country skiing, which complemented his cycling. In March, he competed in his first ski race ever-in the 5K, 15K and the biathlon-at the World Cup at Soldier Hollow.

"When I was young, no one dispelled the myth that people in wheelchairs couldn't live full lives. When I was first injured, I couldn't believe that I could accomplish anything," Barney says. But he believes that if a goal is set and broken down into segments, it can be achieved.

What Barney hopes to give back to his patients is the sense that they can still accomplish many things. He believes he can save spinal cord injury patients time in "putting things together."

Barney tries to avoid what he calls the classic social work opening with a patient: "How do you feel?"

"Well, I know how they feel. They're depressed. It's 'I can't, can't, can't'-a long list of can'ts." Barney counters with "I'm going to help you get a vision of what you CAN do.

"I tell them, 'Look at me. I have three kids, a beautiful wife, an 18-year marriage, two cars, four horses and a house in the suburbs. If that isn't the beautiful American dream, what is?'" Barney does, in fact, have the above-his American dream. "Someone else's dream may be tremendously different. I want to help patients achieve their own American dream," he said.

He credits his wife, son, 17, and daughters, 15 and 13, with tremendous support and patience for the time and concentration his athletic training requires.

Barney has overcome the perception prevailing when he was first injured-that the physical part of his life was over. He has been involved in every physical aspect of life, and, regardless of the outcome of his Paralympic participation, he'll continue competing against his greatest rival-himself.

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